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AUTHOR Flugman, Bert; And Others
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ABSTRACT

A curriculum development project was carried out during 1979-81 to develop a teaching tool to be used to improve interpersonal skills of disabled community college students. The emphasis was on developing skills that can be used in obtaining and maintaining employment. The main activity of the project was to prepare a field-tested manual for use by student personnel staffs in training disabled students in higher-order interpersonal skills. The manual was written after a literature review to identify various approaches to interpersonal skill training. The first draft of the manual was organized around the following four elements: micro skills, complex interactions, work-related encounters, and critical situations. In the draft manual, each skill area was defined, the importance of its acquisition elaborated upon, and specific methods of training for its acquisition described. The manual also included applications of the skills to social, school, and other nonemployment situations. Real-life situations were provided as examples for practice in using the skills. The manual was field tested at three community colleges selected because of their known commitment to disabled students. As a result of the field testing, the manual was revised in format to that of a workbook to allow active participation; a standard chapter format that emphasized the importance of skill development was created; and a seven-page leaders' introduction was added, along with other substantial changes. The product of the study is the field tested manual, which can be used by college guidance and student personnel staffs. (KC)

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INTERPERSONAL SKILL TRAINING TO FACILITATE THE EMPLOYMENT OF HANDICAPPED STUDENTS

BERT FLUGMAN

LEO GOLDMAN

DAVID KATZ

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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Interpersonal Skill Training to Facilitate the Employment of Handicapped Students

This report describes an innovative curriculum development project carried out over the past two years, 1979-81. It was the project's purpose to develop a teaching tool to be used to improve interpersonal skills of disabled community college students. The emphasis was on developing skills that can be used in obtaining and maintaining employment. The product of this endeavor appears under separate cover titled ENHANCING-INTERPERSONAL SKILLS: A WORKBOOK FOR DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENTS.

Need for the Project- A Summary

Whether an individual profits from a job training experience or is selected for a job often depends on the level of interpersonal skills that the individual possesses. Adequate performance on the job, while dependent on specific vocational skills, is often mediated by the person's ability to communicate and relate effectively with peers, superiors, subordinates, and consumers. Despite the importance of this dimension of work, few schools have adequately developed and implemented a systematic program for teaching interpersonal skills.[1]

Goals and Objectives

The ultimate goal of this project was to prepare a field-tested manual for use by student personnel staffs in training disabled students in higher-order interpersonal skills. The specific objectives related to the development of this manual involved:

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[1] For an extensive review of the need for this project see Intepersonal Skill Training to Facilitate the Employment of Handicapped Students, De Kay D., Flugman B., Goldman, L., and Katz, D. New York: CASE Institute for Research and Development in Occupational Education, CUNY, 1980.

- Identifying a group of generic and employment-related interpersonal skills which are behaviorally identifiable, trainable, and of value for disabled students as they engage in two-year college training programs, job seeking, and on-the-job situations.
- Developing a set of sequential occupationally related training exercises which would provide the context for practicing acquired generic interpersonal skills.
- Specifying the approaches and methods by which student personnel staff can train disabled students in generic interpersonal skills as well as the methods for their practice and use in vocational contexts.

Target Audience

The interpersonal skill package was targeted for community college level disabled students with a wide range of disabling conditions including orthopedic, emotional, learning, speech, visual, and hearing impairments. Although some of these students have academic deficiencies, none have impairments in intellectual functioning that would impede their use of the training material.

All trainer materials were targeted at the level of an experienced human service professional with a minimum of a master's degree, and holding such professional job titles as counselor, social worker, or psychologist. Services of this kind for handicapped students are sometimes offered by these professionals through special offices or centers for students with disabilities. In other instances, such services are offered through regular campus facilities in student counseling centers, residence halls, student

halls, student unions, and placement and career planning offices.

All tryouts and evaluation of material were conducted with groups of students and human service professionals representative of those for whom the manual is intended.

A Summary of Activities- 1979-80

Project procedures began with a review of various approaches to interpersonal skill training.[2] For example, training systems developed for professional helpers such as counselors were considered.

Since the manual was designed to promote the development of interpersonal skills within the context of problem situations (work, school, social) that disabled students encounter, critical situations were compiled for use as examples. These situations were drawn from a review of the literature, from interviews with students, and from a survey of community college personnel who work with disabled students at community college campuses in New York State.

As a result of the foregoing reviews, surveys and analyses, the first draft of the manual was organized around the four following elements:

1. Micro skills--such as attending and questioning, from which more complex interactions originate.
2. Complex interactions--that make up important units of interpersonal encounters within any situational context, e.g., conversational skills, interacting in a group.
3. Work related encounters--that are important in obtaining and keeping a job,e.g., taking a job interview and dealing with authority.

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[2] For an extensive review of the need for this project see Interpersonal Skills Training to Facilitate the Employment of Handicapped Students, De Kay D., Flugman, B., Goldman, L., and Katz, D. New York: CASE Institute for Research and Development in Occupational Education, CUNY, 1980.

4. Critical situations--peculiar to the social, school and work experiences of disabled individuals, e.g., being advised a person is inappropriate for a particular job because it involves dealing with the public.

In the draft manual each skill area was defined, the importance of its acquisition elaborated upon, and specific methods of training for its acquisition described. The manual also included applications of the skills to social, school, and other non-employment situations. Finally, all micro-skills, complex interactions, and work related encounters were illustrated using material drawn from the critical situations experienced by handicapped individuals in social and school settings and, most important, in the world of work.

The manual focused on the following micro-skills, complex interactions and work related situational encounters:

Micro-Skills

Non-verbal Attending Behavior
Listening
Asking Questions
Expressing Ideas
Expressing Feelings
Answering Questions

Complex Interactions

Formal Conversational Skills
Informal Conversational Skills
Interacting in a Group
Resolving Conflict
Giving and Receiving Feedback
Assertiveness

Work Related Situational Skills

Making Career Decisions
Interviewing
Breaking into the Work Situation
Dealing with Authority

It is anticipated that the use of the manual by trainees should result in the acquisition of a broad array of interpersonal skills that can be used over a lifetime in situations that go well beyond those used in practice sessions. Since practice activities are always related to critical situations which handicapped individuals encounter, trainees are, in fact, rehearsing responses that can be made to situations that have a high probability of occurring.

Limited tryouts of the manual were conducted at three community colleges and one four-year college (where entering freshmen were participants). A total of seven different chapters of the manual were used by four trainers with approximately 50 disabled students. Project staff observed each tryout session.

In general, both the content and suggested activities contained in the draft manual were found pertinent and workable during tryouts. Trainees maintained interest in both the skill and disability related content. Trainers were generally able to follow the recommended training sequence. On-site observation by the project staff resulted in significant suggestions for improving the manual, many of which corroborated those made by external reviewers.

The manual was reviewed by experts in interpersonal skill training and selected professionals in student personnel services. Among the seven reviewers, there were three who are disabled. Reviews resulted in general and specific comments and suggestions for each chapter. On the whole the draft manual was well received by the outside readers. Sample comments and suggestions of a general nature appear below:

- o I found it to be an ambitious and solid document that will clearly be helpful to many students. I think the format is fine and I liked the many "hands-on" exercises you offer to give the participants practice. Several times you gave contrasting weak/strong examples that I found helpful in making your point. Integrating the samples from the mock interviews, etc., into the narrative was also helpful.

- o On the whole, I am very impressed with this manual. I think it is very relevant to the issues and concerns of disabled community college students. Because of the amount of material that is covered, this kind of course might have to run over a pericd of two semesters. It would be important to give adequate time to each chapter and to assess the level and needs of the particular group who is taking the course.

- o I would like to see more dialogue concerning school situations since most students have little or no work experience and can really relate to school situations. However, I also found it very helpful to have dialogues involving employment situations as well. Some additional situations that might be included could be: a) more dialogues between students and teachers, b) dialogues between students and the bursar, registrar, etc., and c) dialogues with fellow students.

A Summary of Activities, 1980-81

During the second year of the project, field testing was carried out at three colleges selected because of their known commitment to disabled students and because they represent some diversity as to types of student body and curricula--Kingsborough Community College, Long Island University and Nassau Community College. At each college a group of disabled students met for ten sessions. The field testing was organized so that each of the fifteen chapters of the guide was tried out twice. Both the leaders and students were paid for their participation, and good attendance was maintained throughout the field testing.

The five individuals leading the groups had backgrounds in psychology. rehabilitation counseling, social work, and special education. Four had

masters degree and one had a doctorate. They organized their groups so that there would be a minimum of ten students at each of the ten sessions. All three campuses had fairly heterogenous groups. Since the three colleges each had ten sessions we were able to observe each chapter being used twice.

The field testing was carried out by giving the leaders the chapters they would be covering and encouraging them to use whatever approach and style they wished thus giving as great diversity as possible. There was a wide range of approaches--at one extreme a leader read straight through the whole chapter to a rather confused group, and at the other a teacher prepared an audio tape and posters and covered only three pages. A minimum of of two IRDOE observers regularly sat with or just outside the group taking notes. Though familiarity resulted in being on a first name basis and talking before sessions with both leaders and students, it was made clear that this was their session. We were there to observe. After the session was over (usually on hour), the leaders would turn to observers and ask if there were any questions.

The observers would begin by eliciting reactions from the students Frequently repeated questions were: "Was this new to you?" "How did you feel in the role play?" "What kinds of situations do you think you could use this skill?" We then moved on to the material itself, and finally, the leader's presentation of it. Ocassionally, homework assignments would be made as the students left. The observers would then speak to the leaders, asking their reactions in preparing to use the material. In many situations, this turned into skill development; typically, the counselors asked as for help with teaching techniques, while teachers wanted to learn more about counseling techniques.

By observing the leaders we were able to see two major problems that had to be addressed in the revisions. One was that the leaders as a whole were often confused about how to conduct the training: Should they be non-directive like typical counseling sessions or should

they be directive like teaching? Secondly, those leaders with less teaching experience had difficulty organizing the material. From these two findings we developed a standard chapter format that emphasized the importance of skill development, and that minimized leader preparation time. In addition a seven page leaders introduction was written that passed on to the leaders the best ideas about process that we derived from the tryouts.

I meeting the students we found young people very concerned about the future and what their jobs would be. But many of them were also quite inexperienced about the world of work. We took this into consideration by adding sections that drew on their experiences as family members and students. Additional visits were made to dorms and student activities to get a clearer picture of the students current concerns. From that exposure we made the manual into a workbook format that would allow active participation. And we included students quotes in each chapter as a way of acknowledging that their current competencies could be drawn on to meet the challenges of the working world.

Besides developing a standard chapter format we made substantial changes in the first year's document. These changes were in response to the field testing. After the changes were made there was extensive inhouse review by IRDOE staff. The final version constitutes almost a complete rewrite as compared with the first draft.

Conclusion

The workbook represents, we believe, a highly usable and professionally presented product. It should be useful for disabled students in all types of college, in all settings throughout New York State, and elsewhere. The level of writing and the organization and presentation are comparable to commercially published material of this sort. Finally, the workbook brings to disabled students the best ideas and learning methods we have been able to call from all available sources.